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ABSTRACT

Schools are described as reflecting quite accurately for the most part the prevailing value system of the community and society. To the extent that sex stereotyping is a part of our culture, it is a part of our schools. It is reasonable to look to schools to eliminate the most obvious and glaring sex discriminatory practices and for them to abide by the law in these matters. However, the extent to which these kinds of changes are likely to alter the overall value system of the school and of students in the school will probably be minimal. It is argued that schools as organizations can only follow not lead and that change within must wait on change without. (Author)

SEX STEREOTYPING: IDENTIFYING AND CHANGING THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF SCHOOLS[1]

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Perhaps the fact that human beings come in two varieties, male and female, is in itself sufficient reason that in this culture and every other culture there exists to some degree sex stereotyping. It is true to say that in this society we do not grow up to be human beings. We are not human beings as children nor are we human beings as adults. Rather, we are little boys or little girls, men or women, mothers or fathers, uncles or aunts, grandmothers or grandfathers, nieces or nephews. We hardly need an educational researcher, a social scientist, or a journalist to tell us that we draw very real distinctions between males and females: Distinctions which have become indistinguishable from the very fabric of our culture.

The importance of sex differences can hardly be overemphasized. It is well established that if we wish to make predictions about a person's life and times, either now or in the future, then the most useful piece of information we can have in this society is to know the sex to which a person belongs, followed no doubt by knowledge of how intelligent they are, and to which social class they belong and perhaps to which ethnic group. Class, intelligence, race, religion, amount of education--all these are undeniably important, but the most important of all is knowledge of the sex of the individual concerned. For it is by your sex that you are known in this society.

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[1]Paper read at annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Chicago 1974.

Schools do not exist in a vacuum, but are themselves a part of the wider society or culture. (An obvious enough point you might think. However, a quick glance at journals dealing with educational research leads inevitably to the conclusion that a lot of people seem to have forgotten this particular truism . . . if they ever knew it.) It is, therefore, not too surprising that schools themselves reflect the particular sex stereotypes which are found within the society. There can be little doubt that schools discriminate in a variety of ways on the basis of sex, that equal opportunity does not exist, nor doubt that they perhaps foster, perhaps contribute, perhaps encourage sexual stereotyping. The word "perhaps" is appropriate here because while it is clear that schools are in fact as I have just described them, what is less clear is whether they are merely reflecting the values of the society or whether they are a potent and forceful agent for creating the particular discriminations and sex stereotyping which concerns us here.

This would seem to be a chicken and egg problem, a neat circle, a half-full-half-empty problem. Looking at schools (the public schools, that is) and observing what goes on in them and looking at the research that has been done on sex stereotyping and discrimination in the schools, we are forced to conclude that this is very much a question of half-full-half-empty or what you see depends upon how and where you look. By this I mean that an examination of research and observation in schools speedily leads to the conclusion that the sexual stereotyping prevalent throughout our culture exists in the schools. But what is very much less clear is the extent to which the sexual stereotyping which exists in the culture as a whole can be blamed upon the schools, or attributed to their influence? In seeking an answer to this kind of question, research is only marginally useful. The problem is not really the kind of question that a social scientist can answer with research per se for the means to isolate a sample, to manipulate it so as to remove it from

the influence of the wider culture are obvious and clear limitations upon any experimental attempt to distinguish between the influence of home; school; and the culture and times in which a child lives. Any attempt to separate these variables and to isolate the factor of school influence is nigh on impossible.

We are, therefore, into the question of observation, speculation and interpretation, and here I would suggest the realistic view is not a cheerful one for those of us who might wish to alter schools and in so doing, hope that the sexual stereotypes so prevalent in our society would alter in turn. The reason for this pessimism is that there are sound reasons for supposing that schools in fact have little influence upon a child's life and times; that the influence of home and family, of peers, and the overall society or parts of society that a child finds itself in, is of far more influence than schools. Indeed, it is not at all implausible to think that in many respects the school experience is an alienating and artificial one which barely touches the real life and times of the student. We have only to observe the generally failing efforts of teachers to pass on their own value systems to so many children in schools to see that this is an entirely reasonable and plausible position to adopt. Teachers of the humanities with their love of literature, art, etc., etc.; or teachers of the sciences with their concern for scientific methods and procedures; all these teachers who revere knowledge for its own sake, reason, logic, style . . . the point need not be labored further; more often than not all of these are conspicuously unsuccessful at passing these values on to their students, excepting, of course, where the students come from class and social and educational backgrounds which are markedly similar

to that of their teachers. Thus, middle class, vaguely intellectual, humanitarian, artistic and/or scientific teachers are not notably successful in passing on these values to their students where their students differ socially, economically and culturally from themselves.

This line of reasoning suggests that teachers are really not very successful models for their child behaviors in the school, and that in fact students model their behaviors more on home and peers than they do on adults inside the school and are little influenced by the authority structure of the school. What is being suggested here is that the role of the school in sex stereotyping in our society is essentially that of a follower. That the school itself does not really do much to promote sex stereotyping, that is to say no more to promote sex stereotyping than does the society as a whole. If we remember the conservatism of many public schools and of their school boards and administrators, their concern to hue a middle of the road or slightly right of middle of the road position on almost all socio-political issues, we can see that this is a very reasonable interpretation of the school's position. Their role and influence in sex stereotyping is mainly to copy and to slavishly follow the roles and patterns of influence and behavior that occur in the wider society.

There is more than ample research explaining exactly how the schools manage to do this. The recent article on sex roles stereotyping in the schools by Saario, Jacklin and Tittle (1973) in the Harvard Educational Review provides one kind of example of this (i.e., the ways in which they reflect societal values). Basal readers as used in the kindergarten and in the first three grades of school are sexist, and the characters in the stories adhere very

closely to the sex stereotypes that we have for boys and girls in our culture. The differentiation, discrimination, and separation of males and females in all sorts of school activities has been well documented. Werner (1972) has summarized the role of physical education in gender identification and Mann (1972) has examined the absence of variety, scope, and opportunity in girls' athletics. Indeed, the whole topic of physical education and athletic activities for females in and outside of schools and educational experience has recently received prominent attention in national magazines and is presently the subject of anti-discrimination legislation at both the federal level and in several states. Gaite (1972) and Fagot (1973) have shown that teachers themselves exhibit typical biases and stereotypes about career opportunities and life styles of male and female students. Gander (1973 a and b) in her own research and in reviewing the literature on sex stereotyping in schools has identified the many and varied, subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which schools discriminate on the basis of sex and the extent to which students in high schools are aware of these practices (females very often were aware, males much less so). Looft (1971 a and b) has shown how very early the sex stereotypes with regard to vocation are picked up in our culture, such that children in the second grade already identify with certain occupations as being predominantly male or female. The report from the Pennsylvania Department of Education entitled, "Sexism in Education" (1972), in examining just that topic in Pennsylvania schools summarized the discrimination, segregation, and stereotyping which existed in schools, and examined bias, discrimination, and stereotyping in various subject areas, in teachers' attitudes, in counselors' attitudes, in library and school curriculum materials, and in teacher education.

Anybody who spends any time in the public schools, either elementary or high schools, within or without large urban areas or university towns is well aware of the sex stereotyping and discrimination which exist in high schools. Discrimination and stereotyping are equally effective in structuring and directing opportunities for males as it is for females--the pressures and taboos against males taking sewing classes are every bit as strong as those against females taking metal work or automobile mechanics.

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that the role of the school is to accurately reflect the social values of the community in which it exists, and since the vast majority of communities in this society are sexist and are structured upon sex stereotypic lines, then, of course, the public schools which serve such communities are organized upon sex stereotypic lines and do reflect that value system. Little boys and little girls, and bigger boys and bigger girls, are treated by the school in the same way that the society and the community that the school is in treats little boys and little girls and big boys and big girls.

The question of changing the roles of schools with regard to sex stereotyping requires that we face two major issues. First, the issue which has already been raised, namely whether or not schools can in fact do anything <u>except</u> reflect the values of the wider community. Second, even if, as a political decision, we conclude that they can (i.e., they are politically and economically able, and are allowed to do differently from the dictates of community standards), the question of whether it is going to be any use, whether in fact by altering their curricula, attitudes, structures, and organization, they will have any influence upon the value systems that students adhere to is a

mute point to say the least. Earlier in this paper it was argued that the school is an apparent failure when it comes to influencing students and to acting as an effective model. If that argument is persuasive, then it suggests that the effect of having teachers in school who are not themselves consciously discriminating between males and females and who do not consciously engage in sexual stereotyping may have little effect upon students' behaviors or attitudes. Similarly, the removal of bias in curriculum materials and curriculum opportunities, and the increased opportunities for both males and females to cross over what are now sex stereotypic lines or roles, may also be expected to have very little influence upon how individual students behave or upon how such students behave as they move out of the school period of their lives and into adult roles.

A further question to be considered is whether schools should in fact attempt to influence the values of their students: influence either in the same direction as those of community standards or in some opposite direction? Berieter (1973) in recent articles and a book, has been one of the main advocates of this kind of ideal(?) value-free education, taking the view that schools should concern themselves with the teaching of certain skills and knowledge per se and that insofar as it is possible, this should be value-free. He suggests that schools should not concern themselves with the social or emotional behaviors and growth of their students, but that these should rather be taken over by other agencies, for Berieter claims the schools present concerns in these areas constantly interfere with its ability to actually teach, to get students to learn information, skills, and ideas.

What limitations or constraints do these arguments place upon proposals that we might make for changing the role and influence of schools with regard

to sex stereotyping? One way to proceed within the constraints of the arguments and positions just identified is to urge schools to identify and remove the most obvious sex stereotypic biases and restrictions, for example, in curriculum materials, amount of money spent on each of the sexes in athletic activities, and opportunities. However, it seems probable that the changes that are likely to result from this kind of procedure will be minimal for quite some time. Of course, bias in curriculum materials should be removed. Of course there should be equal opportunity for male and female students in all schools and in all school activities. Of course students should not be directed away from a topic area that interests them merely because it happens to contradict certain views that teachers may have about sex appropriate behaviors. However, given that all these can be changed, and it might be relatively easy to change them over a five year period, we should still expect students to be behaving much the same as they are now. I.E., not behaving as children, not behaving as adolescents, not behaving as young adults, but rather behaving as little boys or little girls, adolescent boys or adolescent girls, young men or young women.

Plus ca change plus ca le meme chose--the more things change, the more they are the same! A depressing conclusion, no doubt, but nevertheless one which seems to be inescapable given the kind of influences that schools seem to have had thus far. Real change in the schools must wait upon changes in the value system of the culture as a whole. On a less pessimistic note it might be argued that in fact the value system of the society as a whole is changing, that there is and has been for some time an awareness of sex discrimination, an awareness of the limiting nature of rigid sex roles which

restrict the opportunities and freedom that is for both males and females. Concern for anti-discrimination, for full opportunities for male and female, for affirmative action, for non-discrimination in any and every field is perhaps spreading throughout this culture now. So it might be argued that the time is ripe for schools to join in some of these changes. To take this point of view is to argue that the problem with schools now is that they have in fact failed to keep up with changes in the wider culture and that they may find themselves too far behind the prevailing value systems. (It is stretching credulity too far, as has already been suggested, to expect the schools to run very much ahead of the prevailing value system in the culture or the community.)

The central point here is that we doom ourselves to disappointment if we expect or look for schools to be in the vanguard of social change, if we expect them to be a model for the rest of society to follow, to the extent that schools are now an alienating experience to many students, then we can encourage change. But alienation works both ways: The perceptive, sensitive student can be, and often is alienated by the gross authoritarianism, bias, and discrimination of the school, but other students may well become alienated in turn if the school should shift too far away from local community standards. Are schools lagging behind change in the wider community? The answer to this question probably depends, to steal from Dr. Johnson, upon which school and which community we are considering. Without much doubt there are a lot of schools and a lot of school systems who are still in the Dick and Jane era, where Jane stood by looking decorative and making approving comments while Dick was organizing and doing things. On the other hand,

schools in some of the urban areas and those near university precincts seem to be much closer to the vanguard of change.

A recognition of the kind of institution that schools are leads inevitably to the conclusion that the prospect for fast and real change with regard to sex stereotyping is gloomy. They are made the more so when we consider that the universities and teachers colleges in which teachers receive their training are not themselves notably free of sex stereotypic attitudes and do not do a great deal to encourage their students to push beyond the limitations of stereotypic roles. Thus the circle continues with new teachers taking into the schools very nearly the same stereotypes as their own teachers before them.

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